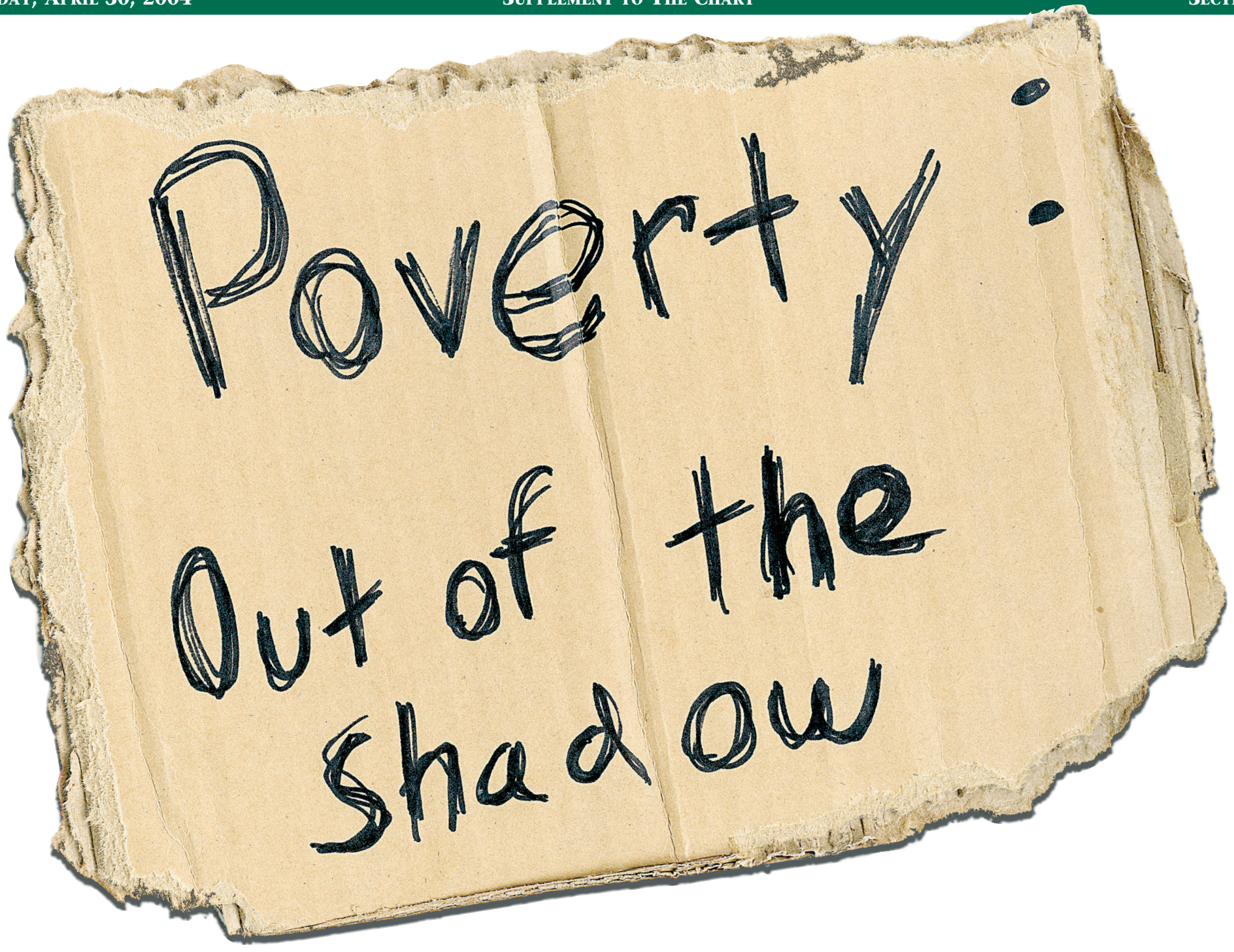
Inside Look

FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 2004 SUPPLEMENT TO THE CHART SECTION B



Local man finds himself unemployed and searching for family.

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Statement of Purpose

To be frank, poverty is a problem we must deal with even if we do not see it directly. It lurks in every town, county and state. The people poverty affects come from all ages, races and creeds.

No one person is immune to its clutches.

Therefore, this interesting phenomenon is something that should be addressed. *The Chart* has decided to take an in-depth look into poverty.

Statistics from the Census Bureau show that a person who lives alone, whose income is lower than $9,000, is considered to be living in poverty.

Many students, ironically, qualify as being "needy" according to these terms.

Students, though, are going through a transition period in their life. Many people are stuck living without a home or family. Even in Joplin, people deal with poverty.

Within this special section, we try to highlight different aspects of the poverty subculture in Joplin and in the state of Missouri. *The Chart* hopes to shed light on this problem which lurks around us. Poverty is an elephant in front of someone's nose, yet it is still not seen by all. This inside look at poverty has yielded stories as diverse as how the police handle situations where the homeless are involved to how Missouri Southern helps impoverished students pay for their education.

We hope the reader takes the time to read these stories and consider the possibilities of helping out one's fellow human being, because the voice of one can make the biggest difference in the world.

But for the most part, this special look at poverty will bring the issue out of the shadow.

Missouri's impoverished rates decline

BY NATE BILLINGS
International Editor

Poverty rates have been dropping in Missouri.

Fewer people are living in poverty in Missouri today than they were in 1970.

Ryan Burson, Missouri state demographer, said the poverty definition goes back to President Lyndon Johnson's term.

The federal government set different income levels for different family structures to be considered impoverished.

"The federal poverty definition for a family of three is about $15,000," Burson said.

One person living alone is considered in poverty if the income is less than $9,000.

Today, less than 12 percent of Missouri's population is living in poverty.

"The decline in the poverty level is encouraging," Burson said.

In 1970, more than 14 percent of the population was living in poverty. In 1980, the level dropped to more than 12 percent and then rebounded to more than 13 percent in 1990.

One significant change is the number of persons 65 and older living in poverty. In the past 30 years, that percentage has dropped from more than 25 percent to less than 10 percent of the elderly population in Missouri.

One section has not seen much change.

"The number of children living in poverty has remained fairly stable," Burson said.

The reason for this comes from the definition of poverty.

"Our family make-up in the past 30 years, the number of children living in two parent homes, has gone down," Burson said.

The distribution of the poverty levels is not constant throughout most of the state; however, more poverty is found near the suburban areas than in the urban areas. Some concentrations of poverty are located in many older areas of urban communities.

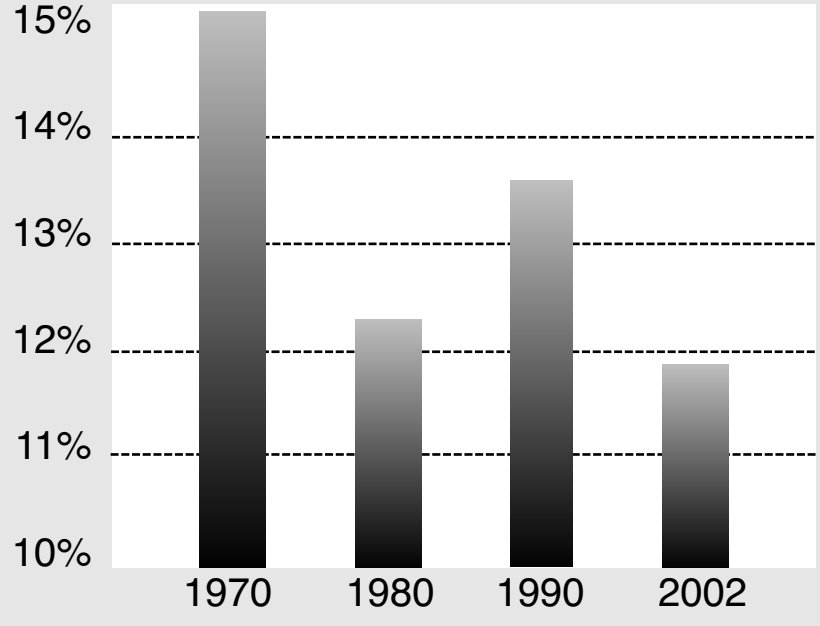
The areas around St. Louis and Kansas City have some of the lowest poverty rates in the state.

Burson said the counties of Jasper and Newton are growth areas.

Also, the number of students among the universities and colleges throughout the state counts for much of the percentage of single-income impoverished homes.

Burson said the reason many students are considered impoverished is because of the definition of poverty and the nature of the students' lifestyle: having a part-time job and paying tuition and other bills.

Missouri Poverty Rates: 1970-2002



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

The First United Methodist Church youth group hosted a rummage sale to raise money for a mission trip as well as outreach programs.

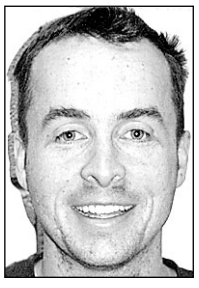
Brandi Boulware/The Chart

Local churches take strong stand against poverty

By David Haut
Public Forum Editor

Many area churches are taking a stand against poverty. First United Methodist is one of them.

Barry Sanborn, youth minister for FUMC, has helped to create neighborhood outreach programs, one of them a toy drive for unprivileged area children.



Barry Sanborn
Youth Minister, FUMC

"The program was created by high school youth," said Sanborn.

Started in 1999, Operation Toy has been successful in giving away thousands of dollars worth of toys each hear. According to Sanborn, Operation Toy gave away over $10,000 worth of toys, all brand new, to 483 children. Funds came from donations and fund-raisers from the chruch's youth.

All items left over from the rummage sale are donated to area charities, including the Salvation Army, Disabled American Veterans and Crosslines.

Sanborn also leads a team of high school youth on a yearly mission trip. Each year the students vote on a location in which they want to serve, pre-selected by Sanborn. Projects range from Habitat for Humanity to Salvation Army to disaster relief.

Each spring, the youth put on a rummage sale, open for three days to the public, to raise money for their mission trip as well as church outreach programs. Funds are allocated after the conclusion of the rummage sale. The 2004 rummage sale grossed $12,672, the second highest in the rummage sales' history.

Recently, FUMC youth have rented an apartment across the street from the church. Residents apply to live in the apartment for a short amount of time. The apartment is furnished and maintained between tenants by youth. Tenants must meet certain qualifications, including finding and maintaining a job and staying drug free.

"We just want them to make an effort," Sanborn said.

Outreach programs for the church are always expanding.

For information or to make donations, contact Sanborn at 623-2796 or e-mail at bsanborn@gbronline.com.

Brandi Boulware/The Chart

A local resident looks through items during the First United Methodist Church youth rummage sale. The rummage sale grossed $12,672.

Homeless in the Heartland

Adam Fast/The Chart

Donald McBenge, a homeless individual who has been living at Souls Harbor in Joplin, cleans a floor. Souls Harbor hired him to wash dishes.

St. Louis native finds self unemployed, looking for family

By Jerry Manter
Editor-in-Chief

Even on the coldest of nights, while Donald McBenge would wind himself into a fetal position under a blanket, he was rarely ever concerned with surviving through the night or finding that next hot meal.

McBenge, who's been homeless for several years, wants to find his family. Most importantly, he wants to find his sister.

"My sister lives somewhere in West Virginia," McBenge said.

Finding his sister, Patsy, has been an ongoing challenge. When the one person he's been looking for doesn't want to be found, it has been a challenge. The last time he talked with her she said she wanted nothing to do with him.

"You'll always be a drunk," McBenge remembers her saying to him. "I don't want to be bothered."

And for several years McBenge was just that. In the mornings out on the streets of St. Louis, the now 57-year-old, would often wake up drunk.

If he was able to walk he'd hunt down aluminum cans hoping to cash in a few bucks for a few drinks. Bartenders knew McBenge well, as he was often waited outside for the bars to open at 2 p.m.

"Alcohol made me forget about all of my problems," McBenge said. "That's all I wanted to do was drink, drink, drink."

There were several reasons why he began to drink. He had a brief construction job in Houston, but when he came back to St. Louis unemployed and found out that his mother had passed away, the emotions and the alcohol just seemed to work hand in hand. Both his parents were now gone. The family restaurant, which McBenge's parents had owned, was now under new management.

He was alone, drunk and an emotional wreck.

"I didn't care what happened to my life," McBenge said. "I slept out on the street."

Hoping to escape all the turmoil St. Louis was throwing at him, McBenge scraped together enough money for a bus ticket to Joplin. The majority of his daily activities included walking around Joplin searching for cans. If there were no cans he'd just walk around. His sleeping area was by an abandoned building just off Main Street. If he was lucky, he'd earn enough money to purchase a bottle of whiskey or a few beers.

"I was too worried about drinking," he said.

McBenge, who's never married and has no children, was able to find free meals and a bed most nights.

If he wasn't drinking, officials at Soul's Harbor, a Christian-based organization, would be more than happy to help him out.

Homeless individuals and families down on their luck can stay at Soul's Harbor as long as there is always an active attempt in the job search.

For McBenge, finding labor jobs wasn't difficult. He was able to find a job at Tyson's chicken in Noel, Mo. for six months.

But he was still drinking and Harbor officials found out.

"I got kicked out of here for 30 days for drinking," he said.

Just as many homeless individuals do, McBenge spent his days wandering the streets and looking for good places to sleep.

"You try to find a place where you ain't going to get wet, and you hope it's not cold," he said. "You just try to get up the next morning before the police see you."

Life on the street is routine, for McBenge anyway; it's how he managed to get by. He'd often be found in downtown alleys looking for aluminum cans.

Turn to **HEARTLAND**, Page 8B

Souls Harbor helps homeless find shelter, food, work

BY JESSICA MACINTOSH
Online Editor

For the homeless, it is a matter of finding a place to stay and a place to eat.

Many homeless individuals can turn to Souls Harbor for guidance. Souls Harbor is a soup kitchen located at 915 S. Main St.

Dr. Art Jones came from Knoxville, Tenn., and founded Souls Harbor in January 1982.

"He decided there was not a shelter in the four-state area," said Joan Lewis, director. "He worked in shelters in Tennessee, and he saw the need. He saw people on the streets with no place to go and no place to sleep."

Jones came to Joplin with $100 and rented the space for the soup kitchen. Three beds and a cook stove were donated.

"That's where Souls Harbor started," Lewis said.

Lewis said he started shelters in Miami, Baxter Springs, Galena, Neosho and Carthage before Jones's death 10 years ago. She said these shelters were originally under Souls Harbor.

"(When) my husband and I came on board to be directors, we found it more beneficial to let it be a community effort," she said. "When you have your headquarters in one town and you're trying to interest people in another town, they need to have their own board and their own directors in those areas."

She said the shelters had been given to the communities where they were established.

"They are still going," Lewis said. "There was a good foundation laid, and the work was needed."

Lewis and her husband Marvin have been with Souls Harbor since it opened. They have been the directors for eight years.

The shelter receives no state or government funding, Lewis said.

"We are funded totally by donations and community," she said.

Souls Harbor has chapel services each evening at 6:45 p.m., which is mandatory for residents.

"We do that for the purpose that it's for people to know who they are helping," Lewis said. "They can see who they are helping."

The shelter works with organizations to help the homeless in finding job opportunities.

"You would be surprised by the people who don't know what is available to them," Lewis said. "If we can just point them in the right direction, there is lots of help sometimes if people just know where to go."

Souls Harbor has dormitories where men, women and families are assigned.

There is also a kitchen and dining area where meals are served three times a day — 7 a.m., noon and 5:45 p.m. Some of the food Souls Harbor serves is vegetable soup and turkey and dressing. It is cafeteria-style.

"Most of [the food] is donated to us," Lewis said.

"We take donated money and buy what we need."

Souls Harbor served 12,524 meals last year, an average of 34 meals per day.

The food boxes given out to the homeless are not included in the total number of meals.

"We gave out over 1,500 food boxes last year," Lewis said. "We give out food to people to take home on a daily basis. Maybe if they don't have food stamps, don't qualify (for food stamps), don't have them yet or they are between jobs, then we give them food."

Also, last year the shelter housed 864 adults, 122 of which were veterans, and 51 children.

At the shelter's Christmas program, which helps low-income families, there were 422 children present for the program. Souls Harbor also has a school supply program.

"We supplied school supplies to 78 children last year," Lewis said.

After the residents eat, they each have a chore they must do.

"All the residents have something to do," Lewis said. "They make their own beds, and there are certain cleaning areas that they do before they go to work or when they come home. Everyone is required to do something that stays here."

Souls Harbor's dormitory is open 24 hours a day. Although the doors are locked at 10 p.m. for security reasons, there is a doorbell, Lewis said.

"Lots of times the police pick up someone along the road that is homeless or finds someone sleeping in a car ... they bring them, and we let them in," she said.

Nancy Hight-Morris/The Chart

Michelle Matos helps serve food at the Souls Harbor soup kitchen. Souls Harbor served 12,524 meals in 2003, an average of 34 meals per day. The shelter also housed 864 adults and 51 children in 2003.

Lewis said it is important to have a soup kitchen for people so they "have a place to come."

"There are a lot of people that are temporarily out of work and don't have enough food," she said.

Teresa Paul, Souls Harbor secretary, has been with Souls Harbor since 1983.

Before working at the shelter, she had stayed as a resident.

"I remember ... it was hard for our family," Paul said.

She said she had a fight with her mother and ended up staying at the shelter for a while.

"Brother Art (Jones) found out I had gone to school for secretarial work," Paul said. "The next thing you know, I am working for Brother Art."

Paul said she learned something from working at Souls Harbor.

"We are all a paycheck away from where everybody can be," she said. "It can happen to any of us."

Lewis said she likes being able to help people.

"When someone comes in and doesn't have a place to stay, to be able to give them a bed, some clean clothes and some food to eat ... it's just a blessing ... to do that," she said.

"It's a way for me to give back," Paul said. "We do what we can to serve the Lord and take care of everybody."

For information about Souls Harbor, volunteering or donating, call the administration building, located at 817 S. Main St., at 623-7927.

Local hospitals try best to help everyone — rich or poor

Programs help patients pay for medical, alleviate payment for treatment

BY MONIQUE JAMERSON
Staff Writer

Area hospitals make sure all of their patients are helped and never turned away, rich or poor.

Sarah Vonderhaar, media coordinator at Freeman Health System, said if patients cannot be helped at the hospital, they always have other alternatives.

Freeman Hospital and St. John's Regional Medical Center have a number of alternatives for patients that are without insurance.

St. John's is nonprofit and medically treats patients regardless of their situation.

After treatment occurs, the patient is asked if insurance is present.

Patients without insurance are asked to fill out a Medicaid application. Freeman does the same.

For Kansas and Oklahoma patients, Freeman has financial councilors who help assist patients in filling out the Medicaid application.

The Missouri Department of Family Services also accepts Medicaid applications.

Marion Adkins, director of patient financial services at Freeman, said Freeman has financial councilors, social workers and two Medicaid intake workers, who are employed by the state of Missouri, that assist patients.

If a patient does not qualify for Medicaid, the hospital has an In-house Charity program.

To qualify for the charity program, a patient must meet the national poverty guidelines.

When determining the eligibility for the program, Adkins looks at the patient's gross income based on earnings within the last three to 12 months.

Freeman may also require a patient to show proof of low income.

This program is only for patients who access the hospital inpatient services.

St. John's has a Sisters of Mercy Charity program that follows some of the same guidelines as the in-house charity program at Freeman. As part of the acceptance process into the Sisters of Mercy program, the patient must fill out an application.

Adkins said, if in an instance a patient at Freeman does not meet the national poverty guidelines, Freeman works with the patients to make monthly payments; this is done through a local bank.

"Freeman helps their inpatients find ways to meet their financial obligations," Adkins said. "Our goal at the hospital is to help people and finds ways they can satisfy their financial obligation for their medical services."

National Poverty Guidelines

(Based on family unit size and income)

Family size	48 contiguous states and D.C.	Alaska	Hawaii
1	$8,980	$11,210	$10,330
2	12,120	15,140	13,940
3	15,260	19,070	17,550
4	18,400	23,000	21,160
5	21,540	26,930	34,770
6	24,680	30,860	28,380
7	27,820	34,790	31,990
8	30,960	38,720	35,600

Source: Federal Register, Vol. 68, No. 26, Feb. 7, 2003, pgs. 6456-6458.

Illustration by Philip Martin/The Chart

Police: Joplin's indigent population fluctuates with weather

BY PHILIP MARTIN
Executive Editor

The homeless problem in Joplin is not a problem for the police department.

Cpl. John Wales, police officer for the city of Joplin, said the problem is no bigger than any other city the size of Joplin.

"We have our share of indigent people, but as a rule we don't have that bad of a problem," Wales said.

"The warm weather seems to spring more. In the winter months you don't have as near as many, because it's too cold for them to stand outside. They'll, for the lack of better words, migrate to another area, another warmer climate."

Wales said as the weather starts getting warmer, more homeless persons will start showing up in Joplin.

> *"We have our share of indigent people, but as a rule we don't have that bad of a problem. The warm weather seems to spring more."*
>
> **Cpl. John Wales**
> *JPD Officer*

When confronted with individuals who are homeless, JPD will talk to the people and help them find a place to stay.

The only times the police will do this is if the individuals are trespassing on city property or they have received a complaint from a citizen about a homeless person.

"On city property, you're not able to set up a campsite," Wales said.

"We do have other areas that is publicly owned or corporation owned where the homeless will go set up campsites. So, we do have those kind of trespassing and loitering cases that we can follow up on."

When the police first encounter a homeless person receiving a call, the officers will give a warning and tell that person to move on.

"If the owner of the property is consistent with signing a complaint then they (the homeless individual) will be cited and have to attend court," Wales said.

If the person is unable to attend court, the police follow standard procedure and have an arrest warrant issued. If the person is ever in contact with the police again, they can be arrested.

The police do not want to arrest the homeless.

The police have ways to help the homeless out.

"We have a chaplain's program, where there are ministers, preachers and different ministries in the Joplin area," Wales said.

"They come together and they have funds where they can either help people out in that period of time or, if it is just a time of need, to get back to their original homes."

Few University programs exist to help low-income students

By T.J. Gerlach
Managing Editor

Few programs at Missouri Southern are specifically aimed at low-income students; however, there are several programs that can help these students.

James Gilbert, director of student financial aid, said more than one half of financial aid funds goes to "needy" students. He said approximately 3,500 of the 4,700 students receiving aid at Southern qualify as needy.

Gilbert said anyone that receives a Pell Grant is a "needy" student. He said approximately 2,500 students at Southern receive a Pell Grant.

"Students need to apply and apply early and apply on time. That way they get the best chance of getting the funds," Gilbert said.

Derek Skaggs, director of enrollment services, said financial aid often works with lower-income students.

"We don't take into consideration someone's financial credentials [when looking over applications]," Skaggs said.

He said academic records are considered more than financial records.

"We actively recruit them (low-income students)," Skaggs said. "We try to do early awareness programs for all students [especially for Upward Bound students]."

Upward Bound works with lower-income, high school students to prepare them for college. Similar programs exist at several institutions in the region, such as Crowder College and the University of Arkansas.

Kelly Wilson
Student Support Center Director

Project STAY is another program offered by the University to aid low-income, first-generation college students. Project STAY is supported by federal funding. The program receives $228,825 annually from the Department of Education.

Project STAY helps students develop the skills needed for college.

The program also helps students with tutoring and aides them in filling out federal grant applications.

The student support center is open to all students.

It offers various services to students.

"We can act as a referral," said Kelly Wilson, director of the student support center.

"For instance, if they need to see what other services are available, we can make contacts with different community services to make sure they understand what their rights and responsibilities are."

The student support center can act as a referral service for economic security, family services and other types of organizations.

Wilson said the center can also act as a liaison or, with written permission, speak on behalf of a student when dealing with some of these organizations.

"A lot of times students really don't even know where to begin," Wilson said. "So, we have those community resource contacts here."

The center also offers free counseling and career and life-planning classes. All services are free to students.

For more information on the student support center, call 625-9234.

Single mom looks to faith to help get past poverty

By Melissa Dunson
Diversions Editor

Choosing between food and electricity is an everyday decision for impoverished single mothers

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, single-mother families constitute 59 percent of the total families in poverty in the United States. Many times the weight of bearing a family's financial burden alone is overwhelming. The prospect of trying to both support a family and raise one can be stressful.

Ronica Collins, 46, from Carthage, discovered the financial difficulties associated with single parenting from the start. Collins has five children from relationships with three different men, none of whom are involved with her family.

"I've been a single mother on and off ever since I had kids," Collins said. "The hardest thing is having to be both mom and dad. I got the mom part down, but I don't like being the dad."

Collins is unemployed and said it is difficult to hold down a job when she wants to be with her family.

"I like to be home with the kids," she said. "But if I work, I can't do that, but if I don't work, we don't have anything. I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place."

"If you pay the bills, your kids don't have the shoes they need, or if you pay the bills, you don't have anything to eat."

Ronica Collins
Single Mother

Holidays are one of the most difficult times for single mothers struggling financially because society shows love through the giving of material things, she said.

"Christmas is always hard," Collins said. "You have to pray that God will provide the good stuff for your kids when you can't."

Financial hardship puts single mothers in a position where they must make choices no mother wants to make.

Collins' youngest daughter recently turned 16 but can't receive her driver's license because Collins doesn't have the money to pay for the car insurance.

"It's hard to figure out how you'll pay the bills," Collins said. "If you pay the bills your kids don't have the shoes they need, or if you pay the bills you don't have anything to eat."

Two of Collins' ex-husbands only recently began paying child support even though their children are in their 20s. Collins said the only reason the men started paying the child support is because both of them went on disability, so the government automatically pays it for them.

Collins relies heavily on her faith for strength in dealing with her difficult situation and believes God provides for her family when she can't.

One month she was $100 short on her already-late rent. Discouraged, she almost didn't go to church, but when she arrived a church member walked up and put $100 in her hand.

"It's strange; God always works it out," Collins said. "I don't know how he does it. He's more faithful to me than I am to him."

Hope is present in Collins' family despite all the hardships. She now lives in a house she can afford.

She is able to pay her house rent, telephone and electric bills all for the amount of her last house payment. Although she can pay her rent from her child-support checks, it doesn't leave any extra money for expenses like shoes or toilet paper.

Collins said her dream is to own a piece of property where she and her children can all have their separate houses in a circle with a picnic area in the middle where the family can have barbecues.

As for now, Collins is surviving and enjoying spending time with her family. She encourages other single mothers to have faith that there is a way out, even if it isn't clear.

"We might not have everything we want, but we have everything that we need," Collins said.

There's still time to sign up for *The Chart* for the fall semester!

We're looking for staff writers, photographers, ad reps and designers. Sign up for Comm. 220 or call us at 625-9311.

Organizations give impoverished citizens confidence

BY WINTER WHITE
Chart Reporter

Poverty. The word conjures up pictures of dirty alleys in overgrown cities, the homeless on the street, children running around an apartment barefoot and women standing in line at the grocery store with worried looks on their faces.

This is an abstract idea that in reality, is much closer to home and affects many of Jasper County's residents everyday.

"As has always been the case, the problems of the nation are very often magnified by the poor," said John Stockdale, president of the board of directors of the Economic Security Corporation on the seriousness of poverty. "One of the ironies of our business is that when times are tough and budgets have to be cut, our clients need our help the most."

Debbie Markman, program director for the Economic Security Corporation, said the majority of those on assistance in the area are "working poor," which means they have jobs but are not making enough to pay their bills and be self-sufficient.

Fire Disaster Statistics

- American Red Cross responded to more than 70,000 disasters nationwide.
- 70 percent of single-family fire victims were uninsured.
- 46 percent of victims in Jasper County were under age 19.
- 52 percent made less than $15,000.

Source: American Red Cross

"The average family size (of ESC's clients) is 2.67," Markman said. "And just over 50 percent are living in a two-parent household."

This means that in the majority of families, the parents are still together and having a responsible number of children.

Markman said the government mandates income limits on the amount of money a client can make annually.

"We don't let them make enough to live on, approximately $19,000 for a family of three," Markman said. "For an individual, the poverty level drops to $11,225 a year."

This contributes to a circular pattern. An individual on assistance, who should be promoted and no longer meets income qualifications, would then have to choose between the promotion and giving up state benefits.

While both the ESC and the Red Cross offer programs to give hand-ups to those in need, the ESC is more concerned with the everyday needs of the community, housing, women's health, weatherization and Head Start. The Red Cross functions primarily in times of tragedy.

In the event of a disaster, the Red Cross provides immediate shelter, food and health needs to meet basic human needs.

In 2003, the American Red Cross responded to more than 70,000 disasters nationwide. The majority were fires, and of those fires, the majority were single, uninsured families renting their homes. Nearly 70 percent of single-family fire emergency clients were uninsured. In Jasper County, 46 percent of fire clients were under age 19, and 52 percent made less than $15,000 per year.

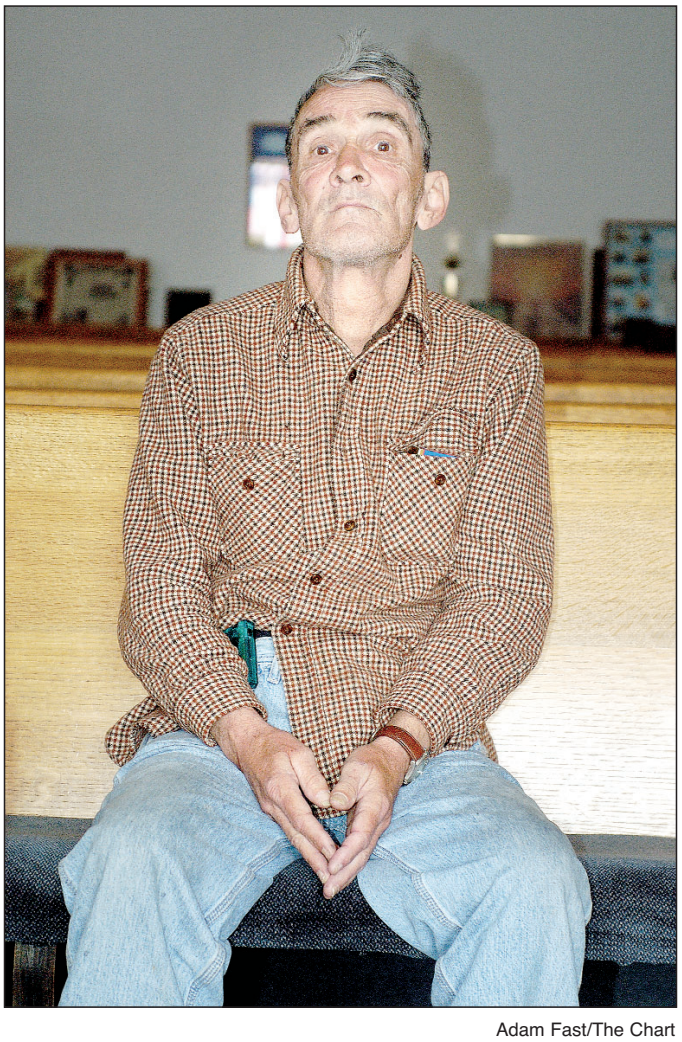
Kobi Waterford, executive director for the Joplin Red Cross, said there is a strong need for volunteers.

"There's a spot for everyone, and people willing to do it are treasures," Waterford said.

There are four areas of need satisfied by the Red Cross: mass core, logistics, form service and mental health services. Waterford said she would also like to see some involvement with Missouri Southern students

"Volunteering looks good on a résumé," she said. "There's scholarship money available and a personal satisfaction that comes from being able to help. We even have a high school student who is currently sitting on our board of governors."

For information on doing volunteer work, contact Waterford with the American Red Cross at 624-4411, or Markman with the Economic Security Corporation at 781-0352.



Adam Fast/The Chart

Donald McBenge has stopped drinking alcohol and is hoping to save enough money to rent his own apartment.

HEARTLAND:

From Page 4B

When there were no cans he'd just walk around by himself. Joplin drivers began recognizing McBenge and would honk as they drove by.

Although often drunk, he'd do his best to wave back.

"He's just a guy that needs some help," said Joan Lewis, Souls Harbor director. "He needs a place where someone will care about him."

For 23 years, Lewis has helped run Souls Harbor. She's seen hundreds of homeless people come in and out of the system.

Although many homeless individuals just don't care, Lewis said she always does her best to lend a helping hand.

"It's rewarding to have that opportunity to give people hope," Lewis said. "They leave with a different outlook on life."

In what seemed to be just another day in a Joplin bar, McBenge ordered a beer. He took the first sip and became disgusted with himself.

For the first time in several years, McBenge was able to make the right decision. He knew he was killing himself.

"I don't want to fall back to those bad habits I had," he said.

Missouri's Homeless Population

1994	58,600
1996	56,765
1998	62,650
2001	87,250

SOURCE:Missouri Association for Social Welfare Web site

Now that he's no longer drinking, McBenge hopes to quit smoking as well. He's been a pack-per-day smoker for several years.

He's hoping to see a doctor soon.

"I'm going to ask about them patches," he said. "I hear they work."

Now that McBenge is sober, he's now able to begin working labor jobs.

The kitchen staff at Soul's Harbor just hired him to be a dishwasher.

If everything works out, McBenge hopes to save enough money for an apartment and begin a new life.

And, he's also hoping to find his family. Although he admits that being alone on the streets is best, it's also the most challenging.

"The hardest part of being homeless is that you don't have any friends," he said. "Everybody needs friends."

While McBenge still has a long way to go before he gets his life back together, he said he knows what he needs in his life to help him get back on his feet.

"I last saw my sister over 20 years ago," he said. "I figure it's time to find someone in my family and let them know I'm OK."

He's hoping to find a phone number and give her a call.

If anything, he'd just like to talk with his sister and see how she's doing.

"I hope something good comes out of it," he said.

"I care about her really."